

(note: 2009)

"A PROPOSAL FOR EDUCATING KRUSHCHEV"

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1. Recent statements and actions by Krushchev suggest that he may be extremely confident--and not merely pretending that he is, for propaganda effect--that the U.S. will under no circumstances initiate nuclear war, and above all that the U.S. would never initiate a strategic nuclear exchange. He may believe that fear of Soviet tactical nuclear or strategic nuclear response would deter the U.S. from such acts even though the alternatives were extremely unpleasant, such as the acceptance of a military defeat or stalemate in a conventional conflict in Western Europe, or the collapse of the U.S. and Western political/military position in Europe. Whatever the realistic basis for these beliefs, he may have an unwarranted confidence in them, and this in turn may reflect some real misconceptions of U.S. capabilities, intelligence and strategic doctrine.
2. To the extent that his confidence in these expectations could be undermined by attacking his misconceptions, if any, it could be in the interests of the U.S. to do so, with the goal of inducing more cautious behavior on Krushchev's part. The following discussion assumes that, at some future point, Krushchev has taken actions or made statements that give clearer evidence than we have at present that he does in fact have this exaggerated confidence in Soviet deterrent capability. An approach by Kennedy to Krushchev or some representative of Krushchev is suggested that would aim, under those circumstances, at raising doubts in Krushchev's mind as to whether he ^{could} rely absolutely on deterring nuclear action, and in particular strategic nuclear action, if he ~~perhaps~~ should offer extreme military challenges to the West.

3. This approach reflects ^{the} a hypothesis that Krushchev may hold many of the tenets of a "minimum deterrence" view: strictly "minimum" rather than "finite" deterrence, in the sense that he may believe that his small number of ICBM's, fixed and soft, and his small number of intercontinental bombers, ~~mainly~~ soft, ~~and~~ not highly alert, ^{and poorly located} provide extremely reliable deterrence.

4. Such confidence is vulnerable on two counts. First, it typically reflects underestimation of the vulnerability of the strategic force to well-designed surprise attack. It could be put convincingly to Krushchev that his force is not only small to begin with, but very small indeed when it has suffered a low-warning, well-coordinated attack. This news might be surprising and dismaying to Krushchev, but it might not in the end, by itself, produce a fundamental change in his confidence; like some other "minimum deterrers," he might be able to adjust his ~~existing~~ beliefs downward as to what it takes to deter the U.S. "All right, I'd only have a few vehicles left," he might say to himself, "but that's enough."

A more critical pillar of his confidence is likely to be the assumption that the U.S. would expect, with certainty, that any surviving ~~missiles~~ Russian vehicles would be used, and used totally and immediately in the way most damaging to the U.S. The "minimum deterrer" tends to overlook the ~~enormous~~ enormous disparity between the threat he could pose to his attacker after his force had been drastically reduced from ~~its~~ ^{its} original modest proportions, and the ~~threat~~ ^{damage} the attacker could still ~~possibly~~ threaten to inflict on him if he chose to continue the war (particularly if the attacker had withheld reserve forces and had avoided lucrative urban-industrial targets ^{in his initial strikes, to keep them under threat}). When that problem is brought to his attention, ~~it may no longer look so obvious~~ that he may see the reliability of his deterrence in ~~quite~~ a new and disturbing light. Even if he is convinced that the certainly of even a few nuclear detonations on the U.S. would deter

"post-attack coercion" could seriously deter Khrushchev from sending his remaining missiles against U.S. cities (so that the President is "really" unwilling to strike first). The gamble does not but seem recklessly, as an alternative to major defeat; his threat or experiment to not take it would be far from incredible. In all circumstances, he may have much less assurance that ~~xxxxxx~~

a small chance of a few detonations would always deter attack. And he

may not be confident that he could convince the President there was more than a small chance that he would be xxxxxx. A minimum goal of an assault on Khrushchev's confidence would

be to ensure that when he contemplates some new challenge to the U.S., or some major counteraction to a Western move, he asks himself

the question: "Might that lead to a U.S. strategic attack? Or might it increase the likelihood of an attack?" If, as seems possible,

he ~~xxxx~~ never feels the need at present to ask himself that question seriously, this one development could have a significant impact on

his decision-making. ~~xxxxxx~~ A belief, such as he

may hold it xxxxxx, that it is impossible to "provoke" an American President into a major strategic attack, does not

6. There could be costs and risks to this approach. P (a) To the

extent that he can improve his post-attack posture in the short-run,

information on his vulnerabilities and indications of the possibility

of attack might lead to changes in Russian posture (dispersal of

planes, higher alert, improvements in warning, etc.) that would

reduce the effectiveness of a U.S. initiative strike from its

present effectiveness. (It is assumed that these changes in SU

posture could not be so drastic as to remove all credibility from

the US threat; otherwise the approach would be quite infeasible).

This is a cost, to the extent that it seems important to preserve

^{maximum} effectiveness of a first-strike strategy for possible actual

use by the U.S. P (b) More extensive improvements would be possible

for Russia in ~~xxxxxx~~ the long run. The ^{above} ~~same~~ consideration

applies, with an additional cost of adding fuel to the long-term

arms race. P (c) The implied threats might add incentive to a

Russian "pre-emptive" strike. But it should not be hard to give

information on US post-attack capabilities (which are vastly greater

than Russian post-attack capabilities) that would eliminate any such

effect. P (d) Giving Khrushchev information on U.S. intelligence est-

imates might have undesirable consequences, particularly if the

estimates were inaccurate or if the revelation exposed facts about

our collection process that would otherwise have remained hidden.

7. The costs to our intelligence process of this approach could be reduced by softpeddling the accuracy and precision of our intelligence on Russian missiles and emphasizing instead the disparity in the threats available to each side after a well-designed U.S. attack on Soviet strategic forces and our confidence that this "new correlation of forces" would lead Khrushchev to terminate the war without inflicting punitive retaliation. This confidence could appear reasonable--or at least, not wildly unreasonable (good enough for present purposes)--even if we did not know the locations of Soviet ICBM's, so long as we presumed their ICBM force to be relatively small.

and note

8. Note that the relevant calculation to present to Khrushchev is not the pre-attack disparity today between our two force capabilities but: (a) the post-US-^{strike} ~~attack~~ disparity after a US well-designed US attack ~~xxxx~~ minimizing tactical warning, and (b) ^{the attack} taking place after Khrushchev had had opportunity to make short-term improvements in his force posture (to be expected after this conversation) but also (c) after he had had time to reflect on the implications of the "coercive strategy" described to him ~~and~~.

9. The plausibility of the threat rests heavily on the prospects attached to a "coercive strategy" in which Khrushchev would be given maximum incentive to withhold or restrain attacks with his residual forces. A SIOP-type attack ~~xxxxxx~~ including both ^{major} cities and governmental/military command centers in initial strikes would do the very opposite; it would ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ probably lead to the full expenditure of ~~xxxx~~ Soviet residual forces against US urban-industrial targets, with the possible results that US casualties would be even worse/^{than} (or at least, comparable to) casualties from a Soviet first-strike concentrating on US military targets. Thus, even with new intelligence estimates, the threat of a SIOP-type ^{US first strike} ~~attack~~ is not very credible. The threat of a "coercive attack" is much more credible and can have political influence even if, in fact, the outcome of such an attack cannot be predicted quite reliably enough to tempt the President actually to use it.

In two earlier comments ("A Proposal for Educating Khrushchev" and "Proposed Remarks by Kennedy with Representative of Khrushchev") I suggested the desirability of increasing the likelihood in Khrushchev's mind that a major Russian challenge in Europe could provoke a decisive U. S. strategic nuclear retaliation. To do this, we might attempt to convince Khrushchev on the basis of detailed, factual argument that (a) we did not believe that he would have much nuclear capability left after such a U. S. attack, and even more importantly (b) the disparity between the remaining strategic capabilities of the two powers would be so great after our attack that we did not believe he would use his remaining capability in punitive retaliation, if at all.

Mere words, and even mere briefing charts, would probably not be enough to demonstrate our confidence in this estimate of the situation. It would also be necessary to act as if we believed it. (I believe that both words and action are called for; just as more words alone would probably be inadequate, I suspect that actions alone -- no matter how bold -- might appear too ambiguous in their motivation to be fully effective without an accompanying, detailed "explanation.") Thus, to show our confidence in our strategic superiority and in our ability to deter the Russians from nuclear initiatives, we might "overreact" to Russian provocations in ways that would look unacceptably risky if we did not have such confidence.

I have in mind an action to be taken on some appropriate occasion that might serve a number of important objectives. The action would be to conduct a thorough photographic survey of the Soviet Union with U-2's (or with follow-on airplanes, if such are available and would be more reliable against current Soviet air defenses), with special attention to suspected ICBM sites. The results of this survey, and particularly, enlarged photographs of all Soviet ICBM sites

uncovered, would be distributed to Khrushchev, to our allies, and perhaps to all comers, along with details of the collection process. The action would have the following goals:

- a. Khrushchev would be given unmistakeable evidence of the basis for our confidence that his current strategic nuclear retaliatory capability is small and vulnerable.
- b. Our allies would be given the same evidence, and Khrushchev would know they had it.
- c. This disclosure would be accomplished in a way that would not require us to talk about any prior basis of our current estimate, and it might even be a cover for that process.
- d. The use of U-2's or other planes, assuming it can be accomplished successfully, would undermine dramatically Khrushchev's boasts of the perfection of his current air defenses.
- e. The collection process would appear a bold, confident move by the United States, even if in retrospect its degree of success should indicate that there was not much risk of failure. Not only would this action provide evidence showing why we are confident; taking the action would prove we were confident, as would our willingness to proclaim responsibility for the action and to distribute the photographs. Any aura of "illegality" would add to this desirable impression.

This operation would tend to be highly provocative of the Soviet Union (even though I would contemplate taking it in response to a Soviet provocation); but this fact might lead to additional benefits. Specifically, if Khrushchev

should respond by reiterating his earlier threat to hit U-2 bases in Europe with nuclear rockets, we could take up that challenge in a highly forceful way. Pointing directly to the evidence provided by the photographs themselves of the disparity between Soviet and Western strategic power, we could identify these threats as either outrageous bluffs or as indications of his own ignorance or irrationality. It is a fact that Russia is in no position currently to be tossing nuclear weapons at a Western power, even on major provocation, with any pretense of rationality. A demonstration of our confidence in this state of affairs, and our exposure of the basis for it, could be used to turn any Russian threat to their maximum disadvantage.

I am, of course, unable to assess many of the factors bearing on the feasibility of such an operation, or its potentially harmful side-effects. Nevertheless, the potential benefits of this tactic seem to me great enough to warrant considerable effort to determine its feasibility and to limit its disadvantageous side-effects.